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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001355

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/GAVITO/HARDING

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [LE](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: FORMER PM MIKATI: PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION  
NOW POSSIBLE, DIVERSE COMPROMISE CANDIDATES AVAILABLE

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

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¶1. (C) Former Prime Minister Najib Mikati believes it is now possible, although difficult, for Lebanon to hold a presidential election on time. Popular sentiment demands an election, and any party seen as preventing an election will pay. To that end, Speaker Nabih Berri is working with whom Mikati described as the relatively non-partisan French initiative, rather than the March 14-aligned Saudis. While Berri is facilitating the election, Michel Aoun remains a key obstacle and a tool for Syria and Hizballah, who remain committed to using the presidential election to demonstrate a regional victory over the United States by determining the next president ahead of the election. Mikati noted that a variety of viable and capable "compromise" candidates remain.  
End summary.

ELECTIONS POSSIBLE,  
IF DIFFICULT

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¶2. (C) Former Prime Minister and prominent businessman Najib Mikati on September 4 told the Ambassador and Econoff it is now possible, although difficult, for Lebanon to hold a presidential election on time. Anyone standing in the way of the elections now will pay a high price, Mikati reasoned, as the Lebanese people see compromise as possible and desirable.

¶3. (C) Mikati believes Speaker Nabih Berri is "betting on" the French initiative because France, under President Sarkozy, now appears relatively neutral and credible. In contrast, Mikati notes that Berri views Saudi Arabia as too partisan and pro-majority, and no longer a credible mediator. Mikati noted that Sa'ad Hariri's advisors say he believes the Lebanese presidency is no longer a powerful position, and that the Prime Minister is the real power.

¶4. (C) While Berri appears to be facilitating the election, Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun remains a key obstacle, Mikati noted. Hizballah wants to retain Aoun's support after the presidential election to provide Christian cover for the group and because Aoun supported them during the July 2006 war. The group is likely to support him as their presidential candidate even if they know he cannot win, but Mikati assessed that Hizballah would not boycott the election if they believed Aoun would lose. But at all costs, Hizballah will find a way to keep the alliance with Aoun

solid even beyond the elections.

DIVERSE "COMPROMISE"  
CANDIDATES AVAILABLE  
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15. (C) Mikati went on to say that Syria and Hizballah don't believe that any potential candidate is strategically dangerous to their interests. But Syria and Hizballah will nonetheless will still work to prevent a genuine, free parliamentary vote to elect the next president. They want to "create an issue out of a non issue," and, especially, to demonstrate a US defeat in Lebanon as part of the larger regional dynamic. By ensuring that no March 14 candidate gets elected, then Syria and Hizballah can claim victory over Washington. Thus, Syria and Hizballah will insist on deciding the presidency ahead of the election. Mikati suggested that the time was right for the US to trump these plans by facilitating a deal through a dialogue with Syria.

16. (C) A compromise candidate could still be found, Mikati noted, as there are several presidential candidates acceptable to both sides. His top choice is Robert Ghanem, who Mikati worked with during Mikati's stint as Minister of Public Works and Transportation and found to be a logical, honest, and respectful partner. Mikati expressed his personal admiration for Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander General Michel Sleiman, but rejected the idea that another military man hold the presidency; soldiers do not have the leadership skills Lebanon needs, he assessed. Justice Minister Charles Rizk, if he succeeds with what Mikati described as his initiative to contact Hizballah through Qatar and Syria, could become president. Central Bank Governor Riad Salameh obtained a legal opinion that he is not

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a government employee, requested his retirement indemnity from the National Social Security Fund, and thus can argue that he does not require a constitutional amendment to become president, Mikati argued. However the regional political situation is likely to remain unstable, Mikati assessed, and Lebanon needs a statesman more than an economically savvy president; Salameh would be a more appropriate president during an era of stability and growth. Michel Edde would also be acceptable to both sides, Mikati noted.

FELTMAN